

Let's Not Play at Our Worship

[Isaiah 58:1-5, 58:9-12](#)

Expressing Christ's Mission through Worship

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Sunday, October 20, 2002

National's vision statement calls for Worship: centering the church in a shared encounter with a merciful God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

About twelve years ago Gordon Dahl published a splendid little book entitled, *Work, Play, and Worship in a Leisure Oriented Society*. It wasn't a best seller, though it should have been. According to Amazon.com, the internet bookstore, Dahl's book is #1,261,591 on their sales list. That means that there are 1,261,590 books that sell more copies. Hardly a stirring tribute! Yet I, for one, found Dahl's thesis astute and insightful. He believes that we Americans have a hard time distinguishing between work, play, and worship. Many of us, he writes, worship our work, work at our play, and, perhaps most damaging of all, play at our worship.

If you spend sixty to eighty hours a week at the office and then bring a full briefcase home on weekends, you may be worshipping your work. If you get down on yourself every time you fail to break 80 on the golf course, perhaps you're working at your play. And if you're here today simply for what you can get out of it, Isaiah will tell you that you're playing at your worship.

Twenty-eight hundred years ago Isaiah overheard people in the narthex complaining that the service that day didn't speak to their needs: Why do we fast, but you do not see? they ask God. Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice? In other words, Today's worship service didn't do anything for us. We got nothing out of it.

I might overhear something similar at today's annual meeting in Stone Hall. Perhaps you're fearful about the possibility of war in Iraq but the pastor didn't comment on it. Your portfolio is steadily shrinking, but there was no prayer for an economic recovery. You're afraid to put gas in your car because a sniper is still at large, but the preacher offered no counsel. Or you're facing surgery or job loss or problems with your teenager, but the sermon dealt with something entirely different. Now, I certainly hope some of your needs are met by the time today's benediction is pronounced. I hope you are warmed by the ushers' smiles; I hope the choir inspires you; I hope you get something helpful out of the sermon. But I must also agree with Isaiah that the true worth of this worship service does not lie in what you and I get out of it. No, Isaiah says, the true worth is what God says in it. And God has a lot to say.

God speaks first in Isaiah's worship service: Shout out, do not hold back! God says in verse 1. God speaks last in verse 14: I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. And God speaks throughout Isaiah's worship service, and in various ways. God accuses in verse 1: Announce to my people their rebellion. God interrogates in verse 5: Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? God instructs in verse 6: Loose the bonds of injustice, undo the thongs of the yoke, let the oppressed go free. And God blesses in verse 9: Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

God speaks throughout our service as well. At the time of confession God judges and forgives. When the choir sings God lifts our weary spirits. In the sermon God may, as my preaching professor used to say, comfort the afflicted or afflict the comfortable. And the benediction is a wonderful reminder that every word God speaks is steeped in grace and love: The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

The point is, this sanctuary is first and foremost God's arena, and this hour is a time for God to speak. Then and only then is it our arena and a time for us to speak with God. In our vision statement we say that worship means centering the church in a shared encounter with a merciful God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A shared encounter, and yet we listen in vain for Isaiah's congregation to share in the encounter. Not a word here about a prayer of confession or the morning offering, not a hint about hymns or choral anthems.

Yet worshipers back then were doing all those things and more. They were even fasting on a regular basis, something I don't do and, I suspect, few Presbyterians do. Instead of dressing up as we do on Sunday, they were dressing down to show their humility. I notice that some of us do that also, though perhaps comfort has more to do with it than humility. Nevertheless, Isaiah's congregation was doing and saying all the right things, yet God accuses them of playing at their worship because during the following week there is no change for the better. On Monday, God says, you exploit your employees, on Tuesday you spread gossip, on Wednesday you quarrel with your neighbors, on Thursday you withhold bread from the hungry, on Friday you overlook injustice, and on Saturday you're too busy playing tennis and golf to spend time with your own family. You've got the rituals down pat, God says, but because your weekday behavior bears no resemblance to your Sabbath observance, your worship is little more than pretense.

God is no hobby, says Alan Jones, Dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. And if God is no hobby, worship is no game. Games are nice pastimes, but when duty calls we put the games away. And when duty calls on Monday morning, do we put our worship away? On the contrary, worship is just beginning when the new week dawns.

To work with integrity through a downturn in business, that's worship. To struggle patiently through a family crisis, that's worship. To act honestly when no one is looking, that's worship. To share your faith in Jesus Christ with a friend, that's worship. To curb your tongue from gossip, that's worship. To protest against discriminatory practices in your company, that's worship. To preserve some part of our ecosystem, that's worship. To open your hands to the hungry, that's worship.

In response to worship like that Isaiah promises, If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of

evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

So there is a reward for right worship. But the reward is not so much a blessing for us as it is a benefit to others. A watered garden, after all, doesn't do much good if it's hidden behind a high wall. No, tear down the wall so you can brighten the whole neighborhood and impart the fragrance of your faith to every passerby. A spring of water will stagnate if it goes nowhere. So let the spring within you flow out to people thirsty for the water of life which can be found only in Jesus Christ. Your reward for being here today is to be the channel through which God's healing waters flow tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.

So then, between today's organ postlude and next Sunday's prelude, let us worship God!